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ABSTRACT

In 1992, the South Australian Minister of Education granted operational control of schooling in the remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands to the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC). PYEC is composed of Aboriginal community members (Anangu) who largely retain their traditional values and customs. This means that generally semi-literate Anangu with minimal Western school experience have decision-making control over all education policies and operational practices in this geographical area of some 50,000 square kilometers. The key activity at the Anangu education system level is policy formulation, provision of infrastructure support for its implementation, and response to information on quality. The management of quality must at some stage emphasize the final outputs from the system for the assessment of its overall efficiency and effectiveness. External standards that are oriented toward effectiveness and efficiency take little account of different cultural processes. Quality in an Anangu school is not simply about meeting client needs but about the intrinsic quality of the education. Anangu parents and students may be satisfied with a particular school that appears inferior by the dominant culture's standards. Culturally-based tensions that arise from the emerging Anangu awareness of the complexity of schooling and its management constitute the greatest challenge for the service provider. The resolution of this tension lies in the development of performance indicators that integrate the concerns and priorities of both stakeholders' cultures and values but puts the authority for decisions in Anangu hands. (TD)

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One Vision, Two Windows
Educational Self determination for Indigenous Peoples of Central Australia

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One Vision, Two Windows
Educational Self determination for indigenous peoples of Central Australia
workshop presented at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference: Education 1996
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**** paper by Geoff Iversen (Manager, Anangu Education Services)***
and
Priscilla Thomas (Educational Management and Communications Consultant)

Introduction

This paper gives an overview of the issues addressed in the *One Vision, Two Windows* workshop presented by Geoff Iversen (Manager, Anangu Education Services), Alec Minutjukur (Director, Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara Education Committee), Ruth Anangka (Chairperson, Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara Education Committee), and Priscilla Thomas (Educational Management and Communications Consultant) at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference: Education 1996.

The paper seeks to outline the development of educational self determination for traditional Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara speaking people of central Australia (Anangu) by providing a brief background and an examination from two cultural perspectives of some of the major dilemmas which have emerged to date. It by no means attempts to provide a complete picture of the intricacies of the quality management issues we are dealing with nor does it detail the processes by which solutions are currently being sought.

What is Operational Control?

In November 1992 the South Australian Minister of Education granted 'operational control' of schooling in the remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, to the body incorporated as the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC). PYEC is composed of Aboriginal community members (Anangu) who largely retain their traditional values and customs. This means that generally semi-literate Anangu with minimal Western school experience have decision making control over all education policies and operational practices in the communities of this geographic area of some fifty thousand square kilometres. These communities range from homelands consisting of a family group to small townships of some two hundred people.

Whilst the devolutionary process is not new in Australia, this is a unique development in the administration of education in traditional culture focussed Aboriginal communities. The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services has relinquished as much control as Anangu wish to take at the macro across-school level, recognising the impact of the Aboriginal self determination movement and moving along the devolutionary continuum in the direction of total self management.

'Operational control' is implemented on behalf of Anangu through Anangu Education Services (AES), an administrative and support organisation to PYEC with line management and service provision responsibilities for the conduct of schooling and other related educational activity. The activity and consideration of educational matters

by PYEC and AES is not limited to school based concerns. The entire gamut of education is considered.

Why Operational Control?

The primary intentions of placing 'operational control' in PYEC 's hands are to dramatically increase educational awareness via this exclusive focus and to galvanise educational action and decision making at the local community level. Further, by establishing a shared belief in organising for educative purposes, the legitimacy of schooling and its policies is established in the culture. It is envisaged that this will then result in greater institutionalisation of 'formal' education in the daily lives of the Aboriginal inhabitants of this area.

In these communities, introduced schooling became an agent of separation of child from the collective of community parents and educators, rather than a unifying force. This resulted in Anangu resistance to the school process, since its introduction altered the community social order. Paradoxically, the school is an important part of Anangu lives but is still not embedded as a social institution in the communities. It is hoped that in the long term this institutionalisation will contribute directly to an improved quality of schooling.

It has been asserted by practitioners in the schools that the desire for control over planning and decision making occurs within a context of community naivety regarding the responsibilities associated with this. Nevertheless in many communities the abolition of control by external non-Anangu bureaucracies has been demanded, not simply requested.

The philosophical belief that Anangu should have control of their own destiny is a stance that has also been supported by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services. Anangu would then be in a position to decide which ideas of the two cultures could be synthesised or separated.

Operational Control and Values

Two of the purposes of schooling are introducing and assimilating generations of students into the norms and values of their own society. However neither of these purposes is vital to contemporary Anangu society for providing the transition from Anangu childhood into Anangu adult public life. The social norms of Anangu society are learnt outside the school gate not inside the classroom. Furthermore, the Community Development Employment Program (a modified form of unemployment benefit) provides a guaranteed government income for each Anangu adult, albeit minimal. The relationship between schooling and the ability to live successfully in the community is not axiomatic.

In an Anangu classroom setting the mainstream style which publicly encourages academic success by students is not culturally appropriate. Indeed it is likely to have the opposite effect with students consciously attempting not to rise above the academic level of their peers. This is but one example of many, demonstrating the dramatically different values between the introduced external school culture and the Anangu one. Many of these Western values are in fact rejected by traditional Aboriginal people. There is in part a rejection of the introduced school system.

One of the assumptions made by teachers is that the classroom is the most significant arena for effective schooling. Whilst it is undoubtedly important, in this traditional Aboriginal setting schooling is quite clearly perceived by Anangu as a political process more than an educational phenomenon. The classroom becomes irrelevant to the bigger picture of the issue of control over decision making, including the curriculum.

Operational Control and Decision Making

Decision making in Anangu education is a political process which centres on the accepted but unstated struggle between 'waipala' and Anangu on how different priorities are maintained. Negotiation (or ensuring a 'best fit') is fundamental to the Anangu learning process since it involves all the activities associated with ensuring balance and harmony in the school. All the integrated aspects of Anangu society found outside the school gate must also be maintained inside the classroom. This negotiation is required on a daily basis as a result of a variety of influences, including the demands and cultural rights to personal independence of students, the obligations to relatives and the daily timetable of community dramas.

The educational aspirations of and the levels of education required by Anangu individuals are tied to a range of community perspectives and priorities. It has been argued that many of the factors contributing to the serious lack of student learning outcomes in these traditional Aboriginal communities result from these Anangu cultural norms and practices. These mitigating factors can only be addressed through local cultural decision making processes. These processes may result in new, understood education policies applying across culturally related communities.

Experienced practitioners consider that suitability and appropriateness of what happens in these schools is more effectively determined in the long term by Anangu. However, this society does not operate in a traditionally focussed cultural vacuum. It is being influenced and dependent upon non-Anangu society to an ever increasing extent. The advent of television in these communities has placed them within a global village. This has meant that Anangu consciously or inadvertently compare and contrast aspects of non-Anangu cultures with their own and adopt or adapt them.

The complexity created by the introduction of an external world view is not lost on Anangu decision makers. They are generally aware of their currently limited management expertise. They have expressed this awareness at PYEC meetings through comments such as "wanting to learn to crawl before they run freely". However, the process of developing the skills and expertise to manage education across a vast geographic area and within a complex socio-cultural context is in itself a major challenge.

The reality is that community needs are often contrary to the views held by the wider non-Anangu community. The school and its practices must fit into its community or find itself rejected as a viable community organisation. However, because of this increasing dependency on the external world view, planning cannot operate on even contemporary Anangu values exclusively, let alone traditional beliefs. On the other hand, if educational effectiveness was judged only by external mainstream criteria, increased marginalisation would occur. However, the process by which quality can be determined and its characteristics conveyed to a group of semi-literate Anangu decision makers in a manner that results in subsequent action, is a matter yet to be resolved.

Operational Control and Quality

The consideration of what constitutes quality schooling by the mainstream standard is likely to be totally different when considered from the Anangu perspective. However, in reality the service outcomes (to an extent not yet defined) ultimately must also satisfy the wider community outside the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands, since at this stage it provides the finance to operate the service.

Not only is there is a difference in perception between Anangu and non-Anangu of the role of the education system as evident in the schools but also a fundamental lack of awareness among Anangu of how their existing education organisation functions. The effectiveness of an organisation that deals in part with educational concepts and outcomes that are essentially foreign to the communities, is difficult to gauge through the perceptions of the Anangu community alone. Indeed, PYEC expects that the administrative support and service organisation (AES) will provide the information on whether education in its entirety is functioning effectively.

These new arrangements of Anangu educational control do not guarantee an efficient and effective education system. It has been recognised that the outcomes of schooling in Anangu communities have been and are still influenced by community cultural matters most dramatically. This has led to widespread concern among teachers that 'operational control' could result in some serious operating problems and impede student learning outcomes. Equally, the effects of schooling on Anangu also significantly influence community and cultural practices.

Coupled with this is an increasing demand from the broader Australian community for all the participants of the new system of educational control in this area to operate within some form of accountability. It is undeniable that the provision of education services in this remote desert area of central Australia is one of the most expensive in the nation. Value for money must be attained within existing and new operational programs if the learning needs and outcomes desired by Anangu parents and communities are to be fully addressed.

The dilemma is whose change agenda and criteria for successful formal education are to be applied?

Operational Control And Value For Money

Devolution initiatives across the broader Australian community originated primarily from an economic rationalist perspective of achieving greater efficiency and cost cutting. This was not the intention by decision makers (including the current Manager) for implementing 'operational control' in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands. There was instead a genuine desire based on social justice philosophies, that authority for decisions be delegated as close as possible to the individuals affected by those decisions, improving response time to educational needs, the development of positive partnerships between school and parents, and the right of Anangu people to determine their own future, in order to improve the effectiveness of Anangu schools. This change in the decision making process was envisaged as ultimately impacting on the improvement of student learning outcomes.

This schooling system nevertheless faces the issue that in order to ensure effective implementation of policies and programs pertaining to qualitative improvement, the measurement of organisation performance is considered essential by funding providers. This measurement is required for both justifying the need to make additional investments and to be accountable for utilising resources more efficiently.

It is appropriate that, in general, an accountability process presents an acceptable balance of measurement across public expectations of schooling, final accomplishments and cost effectiveness considerations. This concept of accountability to their immediate Anangu public is only beginning to develop in the actions of PYEC members. No agreed upon parallels have as yet been drawn between their emphatic traditional cultural responsibilities and those which are similarly necessary with the expenditure of public monies and a wider Australian public.

Even though the question of assessing organisation performance is fraught with difficulties arising from conceptual and statistical limitations, there is an emerging importance for the development of some form of reliable and consistent performance framework for measuring the extent of achievement of the goals of Anangu education. This is because personal, anecdotal impressions of progress will not pass the acid test of an inquiring public from outside the Anangu lands, many of whom already question and have justification for believing that too much money is wasted on Aboriginal organisations.

Indeed, it can be argued that the actual political survival of an organisation such as PYEC is ultimately dependent upon documentation which satisfies accountability requirements.

Operational Control and the development of a Performance Framework

There are numerous models and indicators of performance for mainstream schooling and educational institutions to be found in the literature. Many assume that a system must be goal driven and rational, with the goals providing a basis against which effectiveness is estimated. The psychological benefits of a sense of purposefulness are implied.

However, daily life in contemporary Anangu communities is not organised around careful planning and the achievement of goals. Instead it would be more appropriately described as one revolving around the ad-hoc daily interaction of individuals and relationship groups and with varying degrees of emotional and social adjustment. The recognition of schooling as a carefully orchestrated process requiring reciprocal planning by parents seems minimal.

There are however repercussions in these communities when Anangu have considered that the school in general has not been doing what they want. In this sense, Anangu are applying goals or expectations of some kind on the basis of undefined observation or reaction. The authors contend that in all likelihood it is the organisational culture of the schools which draws a reaction rather than the lack of achievement of specific learning goals.

School practitioners' interpretation of what Anangu want has been limited by the apparent generality of their requests (eg. "we want our children to learn English") and lack of specificity of what the outcomes of schooling are supposed to be. The issue of language acquisition is a good example of this problem. Teachers have claimed that although parents want their children to learn English they don't encourage use of this

language in the community because it is considered that children must speak Pitjantjatjara and not be a 'waipala'. This means that outcomes are not wholly successful from either party's perspective, because the perceived outcome and the process used to achieve it often are mutually exclusive. Teachers might be pleased with the level of improvement in a student's acquisition of English language, but parents may be less gratified when the consequence of this is English spoken outside the school. Indeed it is often claimed that Aboriginal and western cultures are fundamentally opposed and antithetical.

In this scenario, the sense-making of the intended impact of the education organisation across the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, is possibly more adequately described as the influence of goals on organisational behaviour being a convenient fiction. It is possibly more a case of the education organisation fitting in only where the community allows. Anangu regard for the need to set goals is clearly an important factor when considering the overall utility of goal achievement.

One would also anticipate that the objectives which will be defined by PYEC for their evolving education delivery system will be based on traditional cultural norms and not those pertaining to 'waipala' values and ways of doing things.

In turn, the performance assessment of the education system for this geographic area must acknowledge different standards and cultural imperatives by which objectives are to be judged. An unclear educational technology could mean that some superficial aspects of its outcomes are more measurable than others and undesirable consequences are the likely distortion of the total goal system.

Operational Control and Performance Indicators

One quality assurance framework often cited for assessing the performance of any organisation is the concept of input, throughput and output. Indicators are discussed by theorists in terms of their role in assessing performance and practice against quality standards. They are literally indicators of the health of the education system.

It is in the area of throughput (or the processes applied to the education system) where the difference between the Anangu education organisation and the 'mainstream' one is so apparent. Practitioners need to know if the process is appropriate for what they want to achieve. Appropriateness though is dependent on activity consistent with an agreed value system. When new policy is being developed, Anangu values and perspectives will be applied. In all likelihood these in turn will influence the nature of the output.

Many of these Anangu values are at odds with those of the decision makers who allocate the finances for envisaged 'waipala' mainstream schooling outcomes. Conceptually different indicators should be validated and differentiated from those normally applied to an education system. The challenge is to construct performance indicators which embody values that are widely shared by the different groups impacting on the education system (ie. educationalists, PYEC members, parents, students and taxpayers). The framework must then provide the means to determine which group has or should have the greatest amount of influence and those who are the legitimate stakeholders in the educational enterprise. The devolution of responsibility for operational functions also has implications for quality assurance in that any accountability mechanisms must recognise the level of expertise and responsibility in relation to any final outcomes.

It is important for the overall effectiveness of an emerging organisation that accountability (or the proving of quality) and development are seen as complementary to each other. The measurement of quality through the use of indicators, in a scenario where there is an absence of quality standards, would be most profitably established in a way that maximises contribution to the development of the organisation. Hence the framework for identifying measurable quality should account for how inputs are processed to become desired outcomes.

The school effectiveness research paradigm is strongly quantitative in orientation. It is however organisationally rather than process based and restricted to more easily quantifiable descriptions. As such it suffers from an almost simplistic, apparently unproblematic identification of what constitutes quality schooling in a western scenario.

A schooling system as per the arrangement in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands must seek information on quality from all areas. Quality in these schools must contend with some basic student needs not normally confronted in mainstream research situations.

The ambience of school life for Anangu participants (both adult and student) in the individual sites is one of the general elements which is clearly perceived by Anangu community members to constitute a measure of quality. Individual schools have often been described to the authors by Anangu in some general qualitative, descriptive Pitjantjatjara form (eg. as being *lanma* - silly, *kura* - bad, or *wiru* - good). They are moreover statements about general perceptions of the school's culture as reflected by the processes observed in it.

An Anangu school's culture is determined to a large extent by the individuals in it even though it is influenced by the dominant authority of the organisational structure in which it is embedded and the history of its existence in a community. Therefore, any coordinated approach to quality management is complicated by the remoteness of sites from each other and from the administrative and management centres.

It is certainly impossible to adopt a management perspective which emphasises external manipulation and intervention in order to shape school cultures which are conducive to enhancing commitment and effectiveness. It is then necessary for the leadership of the organisation to influence through mechanisms which involve organisation members in a variety of processes which take them from their individual school setting into an across-school, system context. Schools need to adopt an approach which entails extensive negotiation with all stakeholders and work towards consensus on decisions and action.

When schools undertake this relationship building there is a greater understanding of the minimal background experience with schooling which many Anangu parents have. This means that they are still unaware of the daily routines, activities and practices which occur within schools. They are influenced to an exceptional degree by the tales of their children and these comments in turn inordinately affect their perception of the quality of the school. A school program of little rigour which panders to the whims of students may be considered by the community in a good light when in fact the opposite viewpoint may be more appropriate.

Quality in this sense can be considered not as an entity but as a process or way of doing things. The extent to which quality of process and climate is related to the value placed on education by parents is unknown. What is known, through conversation only, is their overriding value placed on children being happy in school.

Conclusion

The key activity at the Anangu education system level is policy formulation, provision of infrastructure support for its implementation and response to information on quality. The management of quality must at some stage emphasise the final outputs from the system for the assessment of its overall efficiency and effectiveness.

External standards which are effectiveness and efficiency oriented take little account of context or different cultural processes. According to these standards a quality assurance system must function in a manner that provides confidence and satisfies client expectations. However, quality in an Anangu school system is not simply about meeting client needs but also about the intrinsic quality of the education. Quality assurance is dependent in the first instance upon identifying those features of the service which are of significance to users and their needs. Anangu parents and students may well be satisfied with the provision of service by a particular school which in comparison to another may be of inferior quality.

The authors contend that when Anangu adults make visits to their capital city they are confronted by an apparently acute disparity between their children's academic outcomes and those of their urban peers. At these times, it is clear that they do not perceive the education system which they control to be working well.

Anangu are not in a position to challenge education professionals about issues of quality on the basis of equal or superior knowledge, as a senior officer may do with them. Furthermore, given the general lack of experience of school Principals in these remote areas, the professionals themselves may not be the appropriate individuals to make quality assessments. Nevertheless, an inferior educational product or service simply cannot be allowed to evolve.

It is the culturally based tensions which arise from the emerging Anangu awareness of the complexity of schooling and its management which constitute the greatest challenge for the service provider. The resolution of this tension lies in the development of a quality management process based on performance indicators which integrate the concerns and priorities of both stakeholders' cultures and values but puts the authority for decisions in Anangu hands.

(* This paper is based on extracts from *One Vision, Two Windows* the unpublished Ph.D thesis in progress by Geoffrey Iversen.)

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